History of the Fairbury Odd Fellows

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IOOF stands for Independent Order of Odd Fellows, a nonpolitical, nonsectarian, international fraternal order. It is one of the world's oldest and largest fraternal orders, with over 600,000 members in over 10,000 lodges across 30 countries.

When people first hear about the Odd Fellows, they usually ask, "Why do they have such a strange name for their organization?" In 1987, Delores Homes wrote an article for the Lincoln Journal. In her article, Delores indicated that the name came from the fact that the Odd Fellows originated in 18th-century England when middle-class workers formed local fraternities for mutual employment help and financial support.

Until then, only the aristocracy had established such philanthropic cliques, and these associations of "common men" were considered "odd" in the sense of being extraordinary.

Born in London, Thomas Wildey brought the Odd Fellows to North America. In 1819, he formed the first Independent Order of Odd Fellows in Baltimore, Maryland. Only 18 years later, in 1837, the first order was formed in Illinois.

Like most early social clubs, the Odd Fellows was a male-only organization. Schuyler Colfax (1823-1885) was only one of two men in American history who served as Speaker of the House of Representatives and Vice-President. Schuyler Colfax was a very active Odd Fellows member. In 1851, Schuyler Colfax recommended that a female auxiliary be created and named the Rebekahs. The Odd Fells organization approved his recommendation on September 20, 1851. The village of Colfax is also named after Schuyler Colfax.

Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. By the 1860 U.S. Census, the village had grown to 269 residents.

On October 3, 1860, nine Fairbury men received a charter to create a Masonic group called Tarbolton Lodge, number 351. The nine charter members of this organization were Aaron Weider, N.S. McDowell, Lucius H. Nash, Henry Remington, Robert Rumbolt, Horace M. Gillette, J. B. Hulsey, O. P. Ross, and S.R. Roberts. It was named the Tarbolton Lodge because two of the nine charter members greatly admired the works of Scottish poet Robert Burns, who lived in Tarbolton, Scotland.

Just nine days later, on October 12, 1860, Fairbury was granted a charter to form the Independent Order of Odd Fellows named the Fairbury Livingston Lodge 290. According to the 1878 Livingston County history book, the five charter members were J. F. Blackburn, John J. Young, W. H. Strevell, John T. Bowen, and John Zimmerman.

William H. Strevell lived in Fairbury and was a brother to Jason W. Strevell (1832-1903). William Strevell was the first of five charter members to officially join the Odd Fellows. Jason lived in Pontiac and entertained Abraham Lincoln in his home in January 1860. Jason Strevell's home at 401 W. Livingston in Pontiac is on the National Register of Historic Places and is open for free public tours from one to three p.m. on the third Saturday of each month.

Just six months after the Tarbolton Lodge and the Odd Fellows were formed in Fairbury, the Civil War started at 4:30 a.m. on April 12, 1861, when Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina's Charleston Harbor.

Approximately 300 men from the Fairbury area enlisted in the Union Army to fight in the Civil War. Because so many of the men were gone fighting in the Civil War, the village's growth slowed to a crawl. In her book Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars, Alma Lewis James recounted how the Kring family returned Fairbury's Main Street to a wheat field during the Civil War.

An anonymous reader wrote a Letter to the Editor of the Blade in the May 11, 1889 edition. This reader recounted that in 1862, when the 129th Infantry Division Company E was formed, more than 15 members of that unit were members of the IOOF Livingston Lodge No. 290. Only the reader and a few men were left as members of the Odd Fellows Lodge. These few members were able to keep Lodge No. 290 going until the men returned after the Civil War ended on April 9, 1865, at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. Colonel A. J. Cropsey, who Cropsey Township and the village of Cropsey are named after, was the leader of the 129th Infantry Division Company E.

On January 28, 1874, the Fairbury Odd Fellows invited Schuyler Colfax to be their guest speaker in Fairbury. Over 1,000 men and women gathered to hear Schuyler Colfax speak. Mr. Colfax is credited with founding the Rebekahs, the Odd Fellows female auxiliary group.

In its early years, the Odd Fellows met at several different locations. In 1895, they built a new building at 122 West Locust Street in Fairbury. The cost of this building in 1895 was $13,000, which would be equivalent to $483,400 in today's dollars.

The business buildings on Locust Street used coal to heat them until the 1950s. These businesses needed an easy way to deliver coal to the basement where the boilers were located. One solution was to build a coal bin under the sidewalk in front of the building. A removable manhole was placed in the sidewalk's concrete. A horse-drawn coal wagon could drive up next to the manhole, and coal could be delivered down the manhole into the basement coal bin.

Many buildings were planned to have both basement businesses and coal bins. The entrance to the basement business was an opening on the sidewalk with a stairway going to the basement. Some basement businesses had plate-glass storefront windows similar to the upper-level businesses. The coal bin was walled off from the basement business

entrance to keep the dirty coal dust away from patrons. The December 1894 Blade published an article describing the new Odd Fellows Temple that would be built. The article said the basement would be fitted up for barbershops and other businesses.

A September 1987 Blade article contains much history about the Odd Fellows. This article noted that they were the first organization to recognize women. Their Rebekah affiliation was chartered on November 23, 1893. Back in 1987, the Odd Fellows had 94 members.

In recent years, the Odd Fellows have been well known for hosting their annual pancake and sausage fundraising event. The group also fills the sandboxes at North Park each year. The Odd Fellows often donate money to support various causes in the Fairbury area.

Amazingly, the Odd Fellows Livingston Lodge Number 290 continues to be an active part of the community 164 years after its founding in 1860. To learn more about the Fairbury Odd Fellows, visit their Facebook page using this link.

The officers of Livingston Lodge #290 in 2023 are shown in this photo. Pictured left to right Arnold Ifft (Chaplain), Terry Lester (Deputy Grand Master 145), Phil Orr (Vice Grand), Nina Hoselton (Treasurer), Robert Hammer (Right Supporter to Noble Grand), Steve Pigg (Grand Master Of The State Of Illinois), Nyles Schumm (Noble Grand), Joe Kindleberger (Financial Sectretary), Ray Jackson (Grand Warden Of The State Of Illinois), Dawn Hurt (Secretary), Steve Metz (Right Supporter to Vice Grand)